What vs Why

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The lights dim. There's a nervous energy. The people on stage are poised, waiting. They touch their instruments and rock back and forth on their feet, ready for the signal. In front, people look up at them, coiled springs ready to be unleashed. A young girl steps forward to the microphone and begins to sing as a kick drum pulsates behind her. Moments later, the band has steamrolled full tilt into a hook-filled chorus as the crowd screams every word back at them, arms in the air, jumping up and down.

The 'What' of Worship

That could be a worship session in a normal Western church meeting, but it could also be an arena concert. It could be a Sunday morning or a Saturday night. On the surface, worship is the only activity we do together that has an almost exact parallel to something outside the church. Think about it – preaching, praying, ministry times, Bible study, communion; they're not easily replicated in any other context. But popular culture is full of concerts that have the same look, the same feel, the same emotions, the same atmosphere. And if we're not careful, we can embrace the outward appearance of our worship as being successful because it looks and feels like a concert.

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Simply put, the execution of our worship – the style, atmosphere, delivery, excitement – is our ‘what’. If I leap about like a salmon during a worship session, that’s just what I’m doing; you could transport me to the front of a Justin Bieber concert and I’d fit right in. If I lead worship and get everyone to scream a response, that’s just what I’m doing; anybody with a microphone can do that. And because corporate worship has so many surface-level parallels with worldly concerts, we can begin to measure it by the ‘what’. It can become the main thing. We can find ourselves celebrating the fact that we’re celebrating. Being excited about the fact that we’re excited.

But every ‘what’ always has to have a ‘why’ – something that continually feeds it. Every person who shouts, puts their hands in the air or leaps with joy needs to have a theology, an understanding, a renewed mind. The fact that God is good or that Jesus loves us is a wonderful truth, but we need the fullest picture possible. We need “the whole counsel of God,” as Paul called it when he spoke to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27 (LSG).

The ‘Why’ of Worship

We need a fully developed ‘why’. If we have that, our outward actions may resemble a rock concert, but our inward revelations will make it different. What I love about Paul is that he modelled it. I have not found a better example than his spontaneous outburst in Romans 11:33-36. It begs to be read in a loud voice, Paul interrupting his own letter to simply praise God, quoting Isaiah and Job along the way. His friend Tertius was dictating, and he obviously just kept writing as Paul sang or shouted or wept, or however he did it: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.”

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I love it because it’s pure praise. Paul is genuinely in awe of God. This man, who authorised the arrest and murder of Christians, has received God’s mercy and cannot stop himself from pouring out praise and affection. It’s spontaneous, but not without a context; it comes on the back of

thousands of words and thoughts about God. His worship is his ‘what’, but it’s turbo-charged by his ‘why’.

Think of everything Paul has just dictated to the church in Rome: the wrath of God against sin, God’s perfect judgment, the fallen state of absolutely every single person, without exception. Suddenly he takes a hard left into the concept of being justified by faith. What? Yes, by faith! It happened to Abraham, he says, and it can happen to us. We gain peace with God, and in fact we gain more than we lost when Adam sinned. Are you serious? Yes, says Paul – we were once dead, but now we’re alive, and also dead again in a different way. Dead to sin! Dead to death! It’s futile to try do it by ourselves, he says. It’ll never work! No, we put our faith in Jesus and live by a new way – the way of the Spirit. And in the Spirit we have complete assurance! We never need to be afraid; we just need to keep living by the Spirit. If we do, nothing will separate us from the love of God! Nothing!! But hang on, he says. What about the Jews? What about Israel? Have they been separated? They’ve chosen not to believe, and unless they believe, they cannot be saved. But God loves them and has chosen them, and they will come to faith, he says. God’s not done with them.

Soaked in the Whole Counsel of God

Paul then makes a statement in Romans 11:32 that sends him off on his spontaneous worship session: “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.” In other words, God allowed sin to enter the world so that He could display His incredible grace!! Do you see why Paul breaks from his letter to praise God? Doesn’t it make you want to? That moment is the ‘what’, but it’s all on the back of Paul’s ‘why’. His heart and mind were soaked in the whole counsel of God – the holiness, the wrath, the judgment, the mercy, the grace, his own sinfulness and God’s great love. He carried it with him. It wasn’t a shallow, single thought or a vague emotion, but an understanding of the nature of God, the nature of man, and the cross where God’s justice intersected with His mercy. He constantly carried the whole counsel of God with him.

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We need this. It will give our worship its proper reason. And then it won’t matter how it looks, or how big our sound and lighting rigs are, or whether we dress like hipsters or not. We’ll jump and shout and kneel and weep, but it won’t be hype.

We won’t have to manufacture the moment. We won’t just be doing it because it’s what we do,

but because we cannot do any less. The ‘why’ within us will be the electricity, the atmosphere, the spark, the thing. All that will count will be the greatness of our God, and we’ll worship Him like we were always meant to.